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ABSTRACT

As more locally based community media emerge to reflect more popular participation in the creation of communication systems, media planners and activists, as well as scholars, must confront inevitable problems of organization. Ideally, management of a community radio station should comprise a democratic structure. Yet, inherent in the difficulties of attempting to establish and maintain democratically based media is the problem of defining and practicing "communicative democracy." The problems of an alternative, democratically constituted radio station, such as new stations in Eastern Europe, include such questions as: (1) Should the station serve its constituents, or should the communities act as resources for the station? (2) Who speaks for which community interest, and who decides which voices should be heard? (3) What happens when the interests, needs, or political agendas of newcomers are at odds with the founders? and (4) How should decisions be made within a democratically constituted hierarchy? Alternative media stations, which fashion themselves as "democratic media organizations," are different from bureaucratic organizations along eight dimensions: authority, rules, social control, social relations, recruitment and advancement, incentive structure, social stratification, and differentiation. These eight criteria are ideals which cannot exist in totality. There are also costs and constraints to constituting a community radio station in this manner: time, homogeneity, emotional intensity, nondemocratic individuals, environmental constraints, individual differences, and the non-reflexivity of broadcast time and resources. While the media of communication can be no more democratic and egalitarian than the people who create them, they can help point the way for more democratic community praxis in the future. (Forty-two references are attached.) (PRA)

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ORGANIZING COMMUNITY-BASED POPULAR RADIO: COMING TO TERMS WITH SOME INEVITABLE PROBLEMS

by

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ABSTRACT

As more locally-based community media come on line to reflect more popular participation in the creation of communication systems, media planners and activists, as well as scholars, must confront inevitable problems of organization. This paper examines some of these problems of existing community radio stations in the United States and in Europe, looking at a variety of issues.

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> "Democracy...is the understanding by all the community of the information that will enable them to make a decision. The reception of that information depends on the full information being presented and on that information being comprehensively received...(Many) factors must be understood before a community or national vote can be taken. And if one doesn't understand this information, then no truly democratic decision can be taken. Certainly a particular power block can make a decision, but power games have little to do with democracy.
>
> "This requirement is especially important in considering decisions involving new technology... Technology is a servant of mankind only when mankind is in control of its own destiny. For technology can be a weapon or a tool or a communicant factor. But technology in the real world of America or the United Kingdom or Western Europe is only a service to the democratic church if it is universally understood... Information is often provided in a language not understood, comprising the codifying jargons of various specialized vocabularies of the various disciplines of the many technologies influencing how we conduct our lives. And when democratic decisions on these matters have to be taken, that's where media workers interface with the democratic process" (Sapper, 1983, p. 116).

This last decade of the century finds locally-based communications media at a crossroads. While interest in building more community-oriented media appears to be increasing (Lewis and Booth, 1989), pressures to maintain gains, as well as to insure continued access for and to all who want or need it, are on the upsurge, too. Throughout the world, various peoples are demanding to be heard, and to communicate with each other through locally-based media over which they can exercise meaningful control.

This is especially critical for the emerging media systems of Eastern Europe. Newly reconstituted communication systems

have allowed people to consider implementing more locally-placed community media. Peoples in local communities are beginning to learn how to create media for themselves. In essence, these new media exist as "new technologies" for the people in whose hands control of the radio and television stations, newspapers and magazines has been placed for the first time. Two recent examples are Mlady Svet (Young World), a weekly newspaper in Czechoslovakia (Waters, 1990), and Free Timisoara Television, a pirate station run by students, engineers, teachers, and workers in western Romania (Gross, 1990). This is also evident in community-oriented radio.

As such newly-conceptualized stations come into being, and as more people become involved with producing information for themselves, inevitable problems need to be addressed. This paper describes a number of these problems, pointing out where pitfalls may occur, and suggests areas to examine for solutions.

Ideally, management of a community radio station would comprise a democratic structure. Yet, inherent in the difficulties of attempting to establish and maintain democratically-based media is the problem of what constitutes a "communicative democracy" and how to realize one in practice (Jakubowicz, 1990b). There are few, if any, guides for where to begin and what signs to look for along the way. The literature of how to organize a station, and how to maintain the station once it has begun to function is scant.[1]

While Barlow (1988) argues that the democratic structure of community radio in the United States has, despite its shortcomings, encouraged "active citizen participation and a healthy diversity of opinion" (p. 81), White (1984) maintains, "the democratization of communication is often a voyage into uncharted and hostile waters" (p. 1).

In trying to address this problem, Skogerbo (1988) stresses that democratization of communication should be understood from three separate, yet often intertwined, perspectives: 1). as the extension of the democratic society, 2). as means to increase pluralism through the media, and 3). as democratically-organized institutions in which responsibility and decision-making is diffused rather than centralized. Drawing on the works of Berrigan (1977) and Jouet (1977), Jankowski (1988) argues that access is the sine qua non of democratic media participation. The issues center around power and control: Which communities should be given access to the air, who gets to speak for these communities, and whose interests are served by these decisions (Hochheimer, 1988a).

But, these issues remain to be resolved for people interested in establishing a new means of democratic community communications systems. There are few, if any, guideposts from the experiences of others upon which to determine the relative likelihood in succeeding. A part of the problem is that most of the studies have been undertaken by community activists and/or critical scholars who have little experience in the organization

of alternative station structures. Indeed, there are few practical guideposts to establishing democratic structures and participation in polities where none has existed before.

The media can only be as democratic, free, and pluralistic as the society within which they exist (Vreg, 1990). The media of mass communication can hardly be considered autonomous actors, either in western capitalist societies (Jakubowicz, 1990b), or in the newly emerging countries of Eastern Europe (Vreg, 1990). Further, borrowing from Stuart Hall (1989), there is no way the planning, implementation, and operation of communication systems can proceed without understanding their linkage to positions and structures of power.

No model exists to suit all situations. All the experiences from the past can do is to point the ways towards better futures. The issues faced by planners can be seen as constituting sis core areas to be addressed. These six areas correspond to inevitable problems which must be dealt with directly in the evolution of the communicative project.

Imagine a group wants to start an alternative, democratically-constituted radio station. Imagine further that the people involved have boundless energy and interest in providing members of their community access to the microphones of the station. The problems immediately begin:

1. Who serves whom? Is the function of the station to serve its constituent community segments? Or do the communities act as resources for the station to present to society as a whole?

The station can be conceptualized either as a conduit for views emanating from the community, or it can be seen as the source of information for the community. Community segments either come to the station in order to communicate among themselves or between other segments in society.

The management of the station must constantly assess for whom is the station functioning. Hein (1988), for example, demonstrates, that, in the interest of meaningful participation by members of the community, a station should be set up to serve as a community resource for the people in the community. The people who help to set up the station can do so as a training mechanism for people in the local community, who, it is expected, will take over the operation of the station as they see fit. Those establishing the station recognize that the station acts in the interests of the community writ whole.

This, however, may work best in a homogeneous community, such as the one Hein describes in Ecuador.[2] Schulman (1985) describes the establishment of a community station for the people of East Harlem, New York. Here, the populations to be served are more heterogeneous, and identifying key population segments is more difficult.

Ultimately, the station is conceptualized and operates either as a center OF the community, or as a center FOR the community. Small stations in homogeneous areas see themselves as centers of the community, in they act as channels for many community members to share information between themselves. The

station acts as a community center, as much a part of the local political/cultural network as are dances, community meetings, local government, or markets. Staffing is by members of various community groups, making the stations OF the community. Examples of such stations exist in places like Bolivia (O'Connor, 1990), Sitka, Alaska (McClear, 1982); Ecuador (Hein, 1988), the Pine Ridge, South Dakota, Indian reservation (Widlok, 1989), and Nicaragua (White, 1988).

Stations FOR the community are those which have a regularly paid staff. Volunteers come from the community, but the primary interaction between station and community is between sender and audience. These seem to work better in more heterogenous locales, and in places with larger populations. Examples of such stations exist in places like Vancouver, B.C. (Lewis and Booth, 1989; von dem Bussche, 1984; Widlok, 1981), Berkeley, Cal. (Barlow, 1988), and in New York City (Schulman, 1988).

2. **Who speaks for which community interest? Who decides what are legitimate voices to be heard? Which points of view are the most compelling? What happens when ideas and technical skills are at odds? How are community views solicited, encouraged? In other words, to what degree does/can the station bring its audiences into the process of program production for themselves?**

Not everyone wants to speak, nor does everyone wish to be heard. "A universal desire to communicate to the masses" is a fallacy without much supporting evidence (Jakubowicz, 1990b). While Brecht's oft-cited dictum (1940 in 1983) foreseeing a dialogic radio system[3] was supplemented with Walter Benjamin's

attempts at actualizing true two-way communication through radio (Schiller-Lerg, 1984, pp. 414-418), we cannot assume that all people are equally as engaged with the medium, nor do they have the time, motivation, or desire to do so.

What about those who do wish to be heard? Station planners often try to facilitate these people, yet problems remain. Should the station be the conduit for all who come before the microphones? Or does the station exercise some form of gatekeeping? Frequently, those who come to the station to be heard not only are drawn from the more disaffected parts of society (who certainly need channels of expression in a system dominated by the powerful), but they also are those who have the easiest means of access to the station, e.g., transportation, time off from work, they live nearby, etc.

Jakubowicz (1990b) argues that truly "free, equal, unhindered" mass communications are unachievable at the societal level, primarily because such a system would not allow for meaningful feedback between participants in communication. He suggests (following White, 1984) that "segments" of society should be in a position to introduce arguments, information, elements of culture, etc., so that they can be heard/seen/read by all other segments of society. No segment of society should be restrained from addressing other segments of society, and no segment should be excluded from hearing all others. Over time, ideally, all points of view can be heard.

This assumes, of course, the existence of democratic arrangements within society, as both Vreg (1990) and Jakubowicz (1990b) note. Yet, even within ostensibly democratic societies, there remain a variety of problems. How many "segments" of society can be identified? By whom? Who speaks for which segment? Traditional means of societal segmentation (race, gender, age, religion, union affiliation, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc.) are, most likely insufficient. If new means of segmentation need to be established, who will be capable and authorized to decide what these will be? Obviously, each society will present unique problems. The closer the observer, the more differentiation between segments is evident. Yet, how close is the audience to the mass mediated messages to be able to see the differences?

3. Conversely, what happens when power, or people, become entrenched? When the interests, needs, skills, political agendas of newcomers are at odds with those of the founders? How do these differences get worked out?

Even assuming equitable differentiation of segments is possible, the next problem is who speaks for each segment. Must elections be held? Are there power blocks within communities who have determined who traditional spokepersons are? Should these be the most articulate people and/or the ones with the most technical expertise? Or should they be drawn from the ranks of those with the most disposable time? Should spokespersons be rotated to allow a wide variety of people the opportunity to participate?

Research over the past decade has found that those most active in program production are most likely those most active in the community, most likely in the middle class, and those who are centrally located in local networks (Browne, 1988; Jankowski and Mol, 1988; Jakubowicz, 1990; Prehn, 1981; Skogerbo, 1988, 1990).

Once people begin to participate, frequently they see themselves as the most knowledgeable spokespeople from the community segment they serve. If other people within that segment also want to participate, decisions need to be made concerning how access can equitably be distributed.

Quite often, the original participants do not receive the newcomers with equanimity; instead, there may be resentment at the attempts of the newcomers to change "our" station. Thus, factional infighting can be an issue even within a given segment. Molnar (1990), for example, points to the fact the newer generation of broadcasters come to the station with a different set of perspectives and political priorities than did those who originally the community station up.

The problems of mediation among segments and between generations of the station most be an ongoing concern of those dedicated to its ongoing success.

4. How can decisions be made within a democratically-constituted hierarchy? Who decides? Who authorizes, empowers, and checks on those authorized to decide? What happens when power is diffused?

This may be the most critical set of issues. Those who come to participate in community radio generally do so, in part, as a

rejection of the structure, philosophy and programming of more mainstream, traditional media (Barlow, 1988). A part of what is rejected is what is seen as a hierarchial, non-democratic structure of mainstream station operations. Indeed, its subversive nature is, as Barbrook (1985) maintains, because it challenges the division between broadcasters and receivers within society.

Jakubowicz (1990b) argues for a representative communicative democracy in which all segments of society can own or control their own media, or have adequate access to the media, so that they can communicate with each other and with all segments of society. Decision-making in the management of communication

> "should take place in conditions of equality, autonomy and adequate representation. If these conditions are met in the way the media are organized and run, and in social communication itself, then representative communicative democracy has a chance of satisfying most of the expectations of the democratic-minded society."

While Jouet's (1985) notion of self-management may mean that he public ultimately has NO meaningful input to station decision-making (see Jakubowicz, 1990b), how can the structure of alternative media by created? Can stations, as organizational structures, be run as democratic institutions? Can "Radical Media" combine parts of direct and representative democracy, as described by Downing (1984)? Or is Jakubowicz's (1990b) diffused "representative participatory communicative democracy" the way to go?

Community radio stations differ from traditional, mainstream stations not only in their world-view, broadcast policies, and

content, they also differ in their structure. A commercial broadcaster has the leverage of hiring and firing, of wages and raises, to coerce workers within the organization to act in ways deemed important by the management.

Alternative media which fashion themselves as "democratic media organizations," bear little resemblance to their more formally-structured siblings. Yet, they need some kind of structure to maintain themselves.[4] They can be seen to be based on Max Weber's "value-rational" orientation to social action, in that commitment to the goals of the organization is taken for its own sake, independent of the prospects for success of the organization (Weber, 1968, p. 24). Even within such "collectivist-democratic" organizations, which attempt to reject the formal bureaucracies inherent to commercial media, authority and structure are, nonetheless, important.

These alternative organizations can be differentiated from bureaucratic organizations along at least eight dimensions: Authority, Rules, Social Control, Social Relations, Recruitment and Advancement, Incentive Structure, Social Stratification, and Differentiation. Each is discussed in terms of a representative participatory communicative democratic structure as described by Jakubowicz (1990b). Following the description of the ideal will be an evaluation of the strengths and shortcomings of this approach.

The **Authority** is the central issue in the structure of the station. All members of the station have the rights to have full

and equal input to decision-making. Decisions are reached through a process of consensus, since only the authority of the whole is seen to have moral weight. Only group decisions are seen to be binding on the whole and legitimate.

Areas of authority may be delegated, but only by consensus of the whole. Areas of authority are carefully circumscribed, and they are subject to recall by the whole group.

In a community radio station, authority is given by the various segments in the community to their representatives in the station.[5] These, in turn, decide consensually what decisions need be made.

Rules are kept to a minimum. These organizations attempt to keep the formal aspects of station operation to a minimum, function more often in an ad hoc manner. This minimizes predictability in station operations, but it allows for the introduction of more participation from members of the community with differing value bases.

Social control are means of power exercised by those in authority. Since authority is diffuse and rules are few, so, too, are the means of social control less formalistic than in bureaucratic organizations. In such collectivist organizations, control is maintained primarily by personalized and moralistic appeals for the good of everyone. Compliance is chiefly normative, asking that Person X act a certain way "in the interest of equality," or "for the good of the community." Especially important is that such appeals carry the most force

the more homogeneous is the group which operates the station. The more heterogeneous the operation, the more difficult are appeals to common norms, since these are fewer.

Social relations between members of the station are key elements as well. Community stations strive toward the construction of an idealist community within the station itself where interpersonal relationships are of vital importance. As such, the station may tend, over time, to resemble the world outside that station, especially where a heterogeneous set of segments is each interested in the station's goals and operations.

Friendship and socio-political values appear to be the main criteria for **recruitment and advancement** in the community station. Those who can work well with others and who make good parts of the group are those who can advance the best. With work being lowly-paid (and often voluntary), with hours at the station taking away time from more lucrative employment, few people seek to make a career of their work here. The attributes cited by Rothschild-Whitt which make for the best recruits into the organization are: articulation skills, ability to organize and mobilize others, political values, self-direction, ability to work under pressure, friendship, commitment to the organization's goals, and relevant experience (p. 515).

The **Incentive Structure** in a community station must be primarily value fulfillment, since money and other forms of remuneration are in short supply. The work is often a labor of

love, and low salaries (or continued work for no pay when the organization is low on funds) come with the territory. Values of community structure, doing good in the world, and working to some greater long-term goal are often given as incentives by workers in collectivist organizations. Often, members live and work and eat together to help keep costs down.*

Control over their work is another reason why people are attracted to such stations. They can produce the programs they think the community wants and needs to hear. They can explore music, information, styles, discussions available nowhere else. They have the time to experiment with new ideas, unconventional political views, alternative lifestyles, etc. (Barlow, 1988).

Community stations seek to maintain an egalitarian structure, thus minimizing social stratification within the organization. Pay is roughly equivalent, or is within a narrow range. Task sharing, dress, job rotation, workplace structure, and decision-making are kept as egalitarian as possible.

Differentiation is purposefully kept to a minimum. The division of labor that differentiates management from labor, or administration from performance, is kept as small as practicable. This is accomplished by three means: 1). role rotation, 2). teamwork or 3). task-sharing, and the diffusion of specialized knowledge through internal education. The creation of a volunteers manual for the community radio station in East Harlem, for example, was a major task for integration of new members as well as the reduction of differentiation of older

members there. People in leading positions in certain tasks may be required to be followers in others, thus diffusing the hierarchy throughout the organization (See Schulman, 1985).

The eight criteria are, of course, ideals which do not and cannot exist in totality. There are also costs and constraints to constituting a community radio station in this manner. A few of these are: time, homogeneity, emotional intensity, nondemocratic individuals, environmental constraints, individual differences, and the non-reflexivity of broadcast time and resources.

As Rothschild-Whitt reminds us, democracy takes time. Morale may be higher, more innovative ideas can come from more points of view, more segments may be represented, but, due to the diffuse structure, decision-making can often be a ponderously slow beast, driving the most committed participants to distraction.

Typically, there are programming meetings, business meetings, political meetings, community outreach meetings, "people" meetings resulting in scarce time remaining for the tasks of the organization, i.e., putting programming on the air. The group needs to decide what is vital and what is not, what can be dispensed with occasionally. A premium should be placed on delegating a sub-group which can be accountable to the whole.

A balance must be struck between everyone having input into all decisions and streamlining in the interest of time, energy

and nerves, but who decides, and how these decision are made, can be crucial.

Homogeneity would help to streamline decision-making, but only at the cost of decreasing the diversity of the groups. Unified action among diverse people with divergent interests and goals can only be achieved through consensus and that takes time and compromise. To groups who feel they have compromised everywhere else, and that he community radio station is the sole outlet for them to "tell it like it is," homogeneity of opinion and action are elusive goals.

Many collectivist organizations are staffed by people from similar backgrounds (such as those with sufficient free time, or who independent means of support); the desire to truly represent all segments of the community may remain elusive. In order to streamline the operation, the station may seek out others of like opinion; this, too, stifles the heterogeneity the station needs to remain a legitimate channel for open communications. While homogeneity may allow for easier consensus-building, it can also stifle the social raison d'etre of the station, losing its legitimacy in the ears of its audience and supporters.

Emotional intensity can tear the fabric of the station apart. People who come to the community radio station are generally those who had been displaced or neglected or ignored by the more mainstream media. Now that they have been given access and voice to discuss the issues most important to them, they may be inclined to be territorial about their time on the air.

Further, in a heterogeneous environment, they tend to see the people who come for different reasons as representing the oppressive majority which as kept them down for so long. Confrontation may be endemic, stress may accompany every decision because turf is so jealously guarded.

People often use several coping mechanisms to deal with the level of emotional rancor which is possible. Criticism may be taken as personal invective, differences of opinion may be suppressed for fear of opening old wounds, open participation is avoided to minimize conflict. Further, conflict is difficult to accept when consensus is being attempted, because unanimity is required. Also, face-to-face meetings tend to bring latent tensions out in the open.

And, we are the products of our society. The pressures and tensions of being a minority-group member (however designated) tends to remove the ability of many people to sustain democratic spirit and behavior for very long. They have long recognized the contradiction between proclaiming that living in a democracy is the means by which people can take greater control over their own lives, while denying them the means by which they can see this control demonstrated or how they can put such control into practice (Hochheimer, 1991). Thus, as Rothschild-Whitt points out:

> "(i)n the face of these behavior-shaping institutions, it is very difficult to sustain collectivist personalities. It is asking, in effect, that people shift gears, that they learn to act one way inside their collective, and another way outside. In this sense, the difficulty of creating and sustaining

> collectivist attributes and behavior patterns results from a cultural disjuncture. It derives from the fact that alternative work organizations are as yet isolated examples of collectivism in an otherwise capitalist-bureaucratic context" (p. 522).

While there are some recent examples of this may be overcome (cf. Schulman, 1985; Hochheimer, 1991), the problems remain for those who plan to create viable alternative radio stations.

There are also environmental constraints such as time, money, and accessible facilities, and individual differences between people. These need to be recognized and addressed on an individual basis.

Two other areas of concern are:

5. What constitutes success? At commercial stations, success is usually determined by the bottom line, but a community station ostensibly does not have this as a motivator. Thus, what criteria are established to know when things are going well? These change over time...initially this means getting on the air; later staying on the air is paramount. What level of community support is sufficient? Can this be measured only in listener financial contributions? What other metrics have been devised?

and

6. What does it mean to be an alternative to mainstream media? Should the station be the common carrier of all points of view, a model that the commercial media never have become? Or should the station carry those points of view only at odds with their commercial brethren? The first model carries a wider spectrum, but therefore carries a different political agenda from the second.

Conclusion

As practice and research in community radio moves into its next phase of development, practitioners, activists and scholars need to take greater heed of the problems posed by attempting to

make "democratic media" a plan for action. This has been an attempt not so much to be prescriptive, but rather to advise what problems need to be faced directly when planning and constructing community radio. As such, this is more a call for a renewed research agenda, along with a guide for where to begin.

The tenure of KPFA in Berkeley (now in its fifth decade. See Barlow, 1988; Lewis and Booth, 1989), suggests that people will respond actively and creatively if given the chance. The major changes occurring in Eastern Europe provide us with tremendous opportunities for community outreach and program planning. There is an abundance of community segments underserved by existing media: urban and rural poor, children, people wuth AIDS, displaced workers, elderly people, etc., who need to become involved in creating information for themselves.[7]

While the media of communication can be no more democratic and egalitarian than the people who create them, they can help point the way for more democratic community praxis in the future. Brecht's challenges, and Benjamin's models, remain.

1.Both Schulman (1985) and Hein (1988) describe theoretical and functional problems of establishing and maintaining stations. Lorenzo Milam's 1975 book, Sex and Broadcasting, is significant, but its utility is diminished because times (and conditions) have changed so much (see Jakubowicz, 1991, for a discussion of the "Fallacy of the Mistaken Historical Period). The National Federation of Community Broadcasters' (1982) 12-page pamphlet "We Make Radio: Community Radio in the U.S." can be considered only a primer in the process.

2.Alan O'Connor notes (personal correspondence) that even within a relatively "homogeneous" community, there may be sever cleavages along political, religious, and generational lines. Among the Otovalo Indians investigated by Hein, there are sharp differences between political factions within the community. Among the Bolivian miners O'Connor (1990) studied, there are divisions within the union leadership. Ultimately, the heterogeneous-homogeneous dimension must be seen as a continuum best defined by its participants.

3."Radio should be converted from a distribution system to a communication system. Radio could be the most wonderful public communication system imaginable, a gigantic system of channels--could be, that is, if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him. This means that radio would have to give up being a purveyor and organise the listener as purveyor...(Radio) alone can organize the great discussion between industry and consumers about the standardisation of objects of daily use, the debates over the rise in the price of bread, the disputes in local government. If you should think this is utopian then I would ask you to consider why it is utopian" (p. 169).

4.This section of the paper borrows heavily from the work done by Joyce Rothschild-Whitt (1979), and from those whose work follows in this tradition.

5.In the United States, this authority must be overseen by a governing body to which a license is granted by the Federal Communications Commission. Other countries have different formal, sanctioned means of authority. This excludes radio pirates, which are answerable primarily to the activists who operate them.

6.And play and, often, sleep together to keep morale up.

7.See Hochheimer (1988b) for examples of working with one such group--displaced farm families.

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